



### **Dear Teacher**

I remember you and I would imagine you remember me well.

I am your student. We have shared space for many years yet have never come to know one another. Although I have known you over twenty years and spent more time with you than even my closest friends and family, our relationship has remained transactional, tense, contentious and at times violent. We have cursed, threatened and insulted each other, I have thrown chairs and spat at you and you have restrained me multiple times. The language we have used to describe one another to our peers I now understand contributed to our tension as you attempted to educate me.

I sincerely believe that you chose to be a teacher out of a desire to help; I somehow believe there was a part of you that possessed a desire to heal too. I needed to be healed, I yearned to heal and yet although our worlds

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converged your intentions and healing abilities seemed to me to be reserved for the good kids.

I write you today not to blame and shame you, however, to share my recollection of our

journey, to forgive and in hopes that at this juncture teacher can be student and develop the capacity to ask a few critical questions.

As far back as I can remember you were there, you were always reprimanding me and telling me what I was doing wrong. You never looked like me and didn't seem to understand anything about me, my experiences, my family or my neighborhood. When we first met I didn't understand race, economics, micro-aggressions, unconscious bias or eurocentrism. I just knew I always hated school.

I was left back in kindergarten. That statement carries with it enormous shock appeal. What must one do to be left back in kindergarten is the proverbial question. I imagine that the rhetorical question often not asked is what the hell happened and I find it interesting that through all of the compound and complex abuse, violence and trauma you never asked those critical questions:

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Today I work with countless educators, physicians, counselors, clergy, community members and families to understand the power

of inquiry and curiosity. The power of the critical questions.

I imagine that had you asked me how I was or what was going on I would have told you about the abuse I was enduring. I realize I wouldn't have the words in kindergarten to articulate it as trauma or to tell you I was terrified but I assume I would have shared I was scared or that I would have trembled or began sweating or that you would read the fear on my face.

I imagine I would tell you about the domestic violence and my father breaking the window with his fist, I assume I would share all the blood and yelling and the feelings of immense fear I often felt, feelings of wanting to disappear. I assume I would tell you how my mother beat my brother for missing his father and looking like him and how my brother learned to beat me and how I had no one to beat but myself. I remember it like it was yesterday how you scheduled a meeting with my mother and spoke about me as though I wasn't in the room, how you told her I could not learn and that I can't speak. I suppose had you asked I would have shared with you that the untreated mental health issues, abuse and alcoholism in my home silenced me. I remember my mother's outrage and her telling you maybe you can't teach and that I speak to her everyday and that maybe I didn't have anything to say to you. I remember how her anger silenced you too and you just punished me by leaving me back.

I imagine the younger me may have thought that you couldn't understand me because we were so different, because you were so focused and I was so afraid. I understand now that I couldn't speak because I was invisible to you then and you only believed what you could see and that you couldn't see me even if I revealed myself.

I remember often being hospitalized for my debilitating asthma. You never asked about it,

had you asked I may have shared it was caused by my terror. I understood from your questions,

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you saw your role to teach me not protect me or assist me in healing. I value learning tremendously and although I despised school as a child I always loved to learn, however, often times I was struggling to breathe and it inhibited my ability to perform.

I remember our tensions grew in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade because I had to fight the same neighborhood boys everyday to get to my house and my terror carried over and disrupted your class. I remember being molested in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and you only asking about my homework the next day. I remember being lost and confused

when my brother's friends' gold chain was stolen on the way to school or when I was brutally beat by a grown man with a bat for the bike I got for Christmas. Third grade was confusing and I had learned to explode rather than implode as I once did. I don't remember the power of fractions or decimals, however, I remember learning in third grade the power of fighting back. It was in third grade as you were trying to teach me decimals and fractions that I looked at my life and realized that the power in numbers and that the lone sheep gets devoured. I learned to build allegiances with powerful people and to be a wolf. You seemed to see my survival skills as a personal affront to your academic milieu and your safety.

I would imagine had we had a conversation early on in third grade I would have cried and

expressed that I was no longer afraid of my brother, but admitted that I was terrified of my community. I would imagine that if when you caught me writing Star 84 on the walls with a marker I would have told you through graffiti and art I was learning to dream and express myself, but you only suspended me and made me clean the walls.

I'm not blaming you for my pain and problems, I'm just stating I spent more time with you than my mother and when I was young I trusted you and looked forward to seeing you even though I often felt you too despised me.

By 5<sup>th</sup> grade you openly began to express your contempt. I remember cracking jokes while you cried as the space shuttle blew up and you calling me an animal. I remember our battles became a war, some you would win and some I would win. It was clear by this point neither you or your peers welcomed me in school. As my trust, fear and dignity eroded my humanity subsided.

By 7<sup>th</sup> grade I was lost and long forgotten. You didn't even bother to get mad at me anymore. I realized my file told you not to expect anything positive from me long before we met. I had to switch schools mid year because my brother and I got jumped outside of our school and my father and his friend came to school with a huge 357 and I lied about seeing the guys so no one would get hurt.

By 7<sup>th</sup> grade my life changed drastically and I can't remember one occasion of you even being in the classroom with me. I transferred to my neighborhood school which was far rougher than the schools we had previously attended. There were metal detectors, police and security guards and I remember my first day someone showed me a machine gun in class. My terror returned, but the asthma didn't. This year I developed deforming eczema from my fear of the extreme violence in my school. I don't

remember teachers, I remember the principal and vice principal and the deans and the police officers but in such a large school I don't remember your presence and definitely don't remember anyone asking was I safe. This place was different and I wish you were there to talk to.

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I remember when one of my best friends got into a fight and the guy he beat up told you he was going to kill my friend and you let him leave the office. I remember laughing at him as he left your office and him walking towards us and pulling out the biggest knife I've

ever seen and stabbing my friend in his neck. I froze in terror. There wasn't any critical stress debriefing or counselors. No one even offered me a clean shirt.

At least no one expected me to learn. When I wouldn't come to school you would send letters home threatening to prosecute my mother, when the police would catch me on the avenue or in the game room they would put me in the back of the van with the other truant kids and take us back to school, you were always disappointed to have me there and no one ever dared ask how I was. With time and extreme violence, I became more and more of an "animal". When a guy in our junior high school got cut with a razor from the top of his head to his chin and I watched his cut open to the white flesh on his face I finished my lunch because by then I had normalized the violence and had put on the armor of a wolf.

I was 11 years old the first time I saw someone murdered in front of me, 11 when I found my grandmother dead on the kitchen floor. 11 when

I was left back in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and 11 the first time I was arrested. I wish someone would have asked if I was ok.

Many interventions were done to me, however, there was no intervention for me, no one to inquire about the trauma I'd experienced, no one to provide the much needed mental health care and support. I'd been treated like garbage most of my young life and as a result began to treat the world around me like garbage. Hopelessness and despair were my everyday reality and I was just looking for safety and belonging. You told me I would never amount to anything and die in a pool of my own blood and the following year placed me in a class where all of my former classmates are either dead or doing life in prison for murder.

With a lifetime of complex trauma, I was tracked into a newly created 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. I didn't know or think to ask what was the stratification or actuarial tool used to determine I belonged, but I remember feeling a sense of pride. Again I don't recall a teacher, however, I recall that the Dean would lock us in the class from the outside. I didn't know anything about fire codes, dignity violations or creating stimulating environments but I knew I had earned respect for being the worst of the worst. Eventually we made a deal and I was promised I would graduate if I didn't return. I upheld my part of the deal and stopped coming and once again you betrayed me and retained me.

I went to summer school in a neighborhood even more dangerous than my own and had to arm myself daily to complete my classes in the hot Brooklyn heat without any air-conditioning. No one ever asked how did we end up there, why did we fail, what lessons were taking precedence over math, reading and social studies or why did we all have guns with us....

By 14 I was entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade for the first time and my mother sacrificed to send me to Catholic

School. We met again, but you were very different. I don't know if I would say you believed in me, but you definitely had unfamiliar expectations of me. You had matured and didn't threaten me, call me names or downgrade me. I learned a new way. I believe

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if you would have asked me how I was or what was going on we possibly could have talked. I remember not understanding algebra and needing resource classes. I remember feeling safe with you. Your school didn't have metal detectors or police and although I needed my gun to get around the neighborhood to school I never felt like I needed it in the classroom. I started to leave my gun home when I came to your school until I was jumped

by some guys from my neighborhood and there was retaliatory murder later that day. The next day we took our year end test and I failed you. You told me I wasn't welcome back next year and it was back to the zoo.

I understand today how unrealistic your expectations were of me. As youth, we are always expected to show up and be fully present despite what's going on at home or in our community. Despite the pain, and despair, despite the terror, we are expected to perform.

I didn't last long in my new school until I was expelled for fighting and carrying a razor. I wish you would have asked why did I carry a razor to school and I may have told you I had to to walk through the housing projects to get to school and that I couldn't get my aun past the metal



detectors. Somehow the violence and apathy of your school felt familiar. I believe you never wanted me there and would have pushed me out anyway.

By 15 I had run away from my home in Brooklyn to Springfield Massachusetts to sell drugs. I had a half dozens arrests by that time and that year received my first violent arrest (Unlawful imprisonment and aggravated assault). I was remanded Spotford Juvenile Facility in the Bronx because the prosecutor stated "I was a danger to the law abiding citizens of Brooklyn". I witnessed a violent attack my first day and it was that moment that I realized you had been preparing me for the violence and degradation I would experience at prison. Spotford was full of violence and dignity violations, however, by then, I had learned the power of extreme violence and adaptability.

When I left Spotford I attended a school in the basement of a neighborhood church named Alternatives to Detention. You were there and you let us play pool and ping pong all day. You seemed afraid of us.

It was at 15 that I also entered my first adult facility. I was arrested for stealing socks and lied about my age because my friend was afraid to go to Rikers Island alone. The brutality and violence we witnessed and experienced no one ever asked about. No one ever asked why I was stealing socks or if I needed them, no one ever asked if I was ok. For that period of my life you were gone.

I was released and moved with my mother to Pennsylvania to avoid being sentenced to Lincoln Hall school for boys.

At the time I didn't realize that my brain was still developing and how that coupled with the adverse childhood experiences I encountered impacted my thinking, decision making, behavior and life outcomes. I now know that research on trauma wasn't as prevalent while you were studying to be a teacher and I'm don't blame you for what I didn't know how to tell you. I write you this letter to express that I understand you didn't know what you didn't know and to invite you to join me today in spreading this game changing knowledge and educating your peers. I invite you to share the power of asking the critical questions:

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From a place of gratitude and appreciation I urge you to do more, I empower you to harness all of the research around trauma and brain development and to develop a better way to inquire and engage as 21<sup>st</sup> Century educators. My hopes are that we will collectively practice trauma informed pedagogy grounded in compassion and equity.

I thank you for choosing to teach and I thank you for your willingness to be a student and allow me to share my story.



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